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LEGIT REVIEW



Peggy Goss, left, and Kristen Brennan star in "Emma's Child."

Emma's Child

(Off Broadway Theater) 99 seats; \$27.50 top

A No Title Prods. presentation of a play by Kristine Thatcher. Directed by Meryl Friedman; set, Russ Borski; costumes, Denise Ervin; lighting, Dan Weingarten. Opened Nov. 2, 2001, reviewed Nov. 17. Closes Dec. 16. Running time: 1 HOUR, 45 MIN.

Henry Farrell	.....	Rod McLachlan
Jean Farrell	.....	Peggy Goss
Emma Miller	.....
Michelle	.....	Kristen Brennan
Tess/Dr. Arbaugh	.....	Erin J. O'Brien
Franny/Vivian	.....
Rademacher	.....	Kim Leigh Smith
Laurence	.....	Steve Totland
Mary Jo	.....	Allison Sie
Sam	.....	John Eric Montana

By STEVEN OXMAN

In "Emma's Child," adoptive parents must decide what to do when the baby who would be theirs is born with a severe disability. It's a story that belongs squarely to the genre of the TV movie. Some clever, nonlinear playwriting and very polished acting from this ensemble at the Odyssey elevate Kristine Thatcher's 1995 play beyond the level of a sappy tearjerker, although even these qualities can't make the story feel any less familiar, which is likely why CBS or Lifetime hasn't adapted it. It is what it is, and the fact that it's deeply personal and deeply felt means that it's pretty good on its own, limited terms.

It's a play that Thatcher, in a sense, had to write, based as it is on her and her husband's personal experience. Their dramatic alter-egos are Jean and Henry Farrell, played excellently here by Peggy Goss and Rod McLachlan.

They're a couple entering middle age, and after 15 years of belated efforts at having a child of their own, they're now seeking to adopt. They seem to find an ideal match when the adoption agency introduces them to Emma Miller (a strong Kristen Brennan), a young, pregnant woman already struggling to raise a 2-year-old on her own.

Everything seems to be working out until the baby is born with hydrocephalus, a condition in

which water builds up in the brain, likely to result in severe retardation and even death.

Henry, a loving but practical man who has survived his own bout with cancer, accepts the agency's suggestion that they move on to the next possibility.

Bill Jean feels the need at least to see the baby, named Robin, and once she does, she's almost immediately attached. At first, she just takes on the role of protector, making sure Robin is made as comfortable as can be by his caregivers at the hospital, including nurse Laurence (Steve Totland, who's nicely saucy but points too much) and his assistant Mary Jo (a likable Allison Sie). But it isn't long before the attachment has gone beyond the point of no return, causing severe, potentially marriage-ending friction between her and Henry.

Under Meryl Friedman's direction, Goss captures the absolute-ness of Jean's connection with the baby, and McLachlan is believably able to argue that his wife's emotions border on the edge of sanity.

Their relationship is really the crux of the plot, and Thatcher has added — not particularly effectively — a reflective sub-story that involves the breakup of their close friends Franny (Kim Leigh Smith) and Sam (John Eric Montana).

What Thatcher does do smartly is reveal bits of narrative in unchronological sequence, which places focus squarely on the honesty of the emotional responses rather than the potentially melodramatic. Friedman's fluid staging effectively emphasizes this, with Dan Weingarten's lighting design marking the transitions between overlapping scenes.

The ending doesn't quite hit its mark — where, or when, we are at the last moment comes off confusingly. And Thatcher lingers on the less interesting, generic philosophical implications of these events rather than the more challenging ones.

It may be very true to life, but "Emma's Child" is not quite affecting, provocative or lyrical enough to ascend into memorable dramatic art.